English for ASEAN!: African and Asian Teacher Migration in response to Thailand's English-language Education Boom

Maureen Hickey, National University of Singapore

Wednesday, January 15, 2014 - 3:30pm to 5:00pm
Thomson Hall 317

The number of English teachers migrants in Thailand has been growing steadily over the past decade in response to a concerted effort by the Thai government to expand English language instruction and bilingual programs in Thai schools. The upcoming 2015 ASEAN Economic Agreement is usually cited as the impetus, as Thailand consistently ranks near the bottom in regional English competency. As a result, schools across Thailand are scrambling to ‘upgrade’ their English Programs and to identify (and pay for) foreign teachers. In order to meet growing demand, schools are increasingly turning to ‘non-native’ English speakers from ‘outer-circle’ English-speaking countries. These teachers come primarily from the Philippines and a variety of African countries with a British colonial history, and are often more qualified than their colleagues from ‘inner-circle’ countries, yet are paid less than their ‘native-speaking’ counterparts.

In this talk I draw on recent fieldwork interviews to discuss the work and life experiences of African and Filipino migrants teaching English in rural schools in Eastern and Northeastern Thailand. For these teachers, schools outside of Bangkok are increasingly appealing as they often find it difficult to obtain positions in urban schools or find themselves let go with little notice when the school wishes to replace them with ‘native’ English speaking teachers. Racism and bias against certain nationalities (and accents) is a significant problem for African teachers and Filipino teachers also face significant discrimination in the workplace - although they face much less in daily life - and consistently receive the lowest salaries, despite the fact that many are highly qualified and have considerable experience. I explore how the choices of this particular stream of ‘middling’ migrants overlaps or diverges from growing numbers of transnational student migrants and from other forms of youth migration in and from Asia, as well as how particular constellations of skills, nationality and race intersect to structure specific labor flows. Finally, I consider the possibilities of these teachers as mobile transnational subjects engaging in South-South cross-cultural exchanges at that interpersonal and community scales and who potentially embody emerging and alternative forms of transnationalism and (rural) cosmopolitanism in the world today.
Bio:

Maureen Hickey is a Research Fellow with the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore where she works with the Asian Migration Research Cluster. She completed her doctorate in geography at the University of Washington in 2010 and is currently writing a book based on her dissertation and follow-up research entitled, Taxi Man!: Neoliberalism, Transportation Work and Gendered Labor in Bangkok Thailand. She recently launched a new research project, entitled Globalising English, Mobile Aspirations, and Rural Engagements: Transnational English-Teacher Migrants from Asia and Africa Working in Asia, investigating the growing number of professional educators from ‘outer-circle’ English-speaking countries migrating Asia in order to participate in the region's booming English-language education industry. Dr. Hickey's research interests include economic and cultural globalization, international political economy, labor and migration, class relations, gender and masculinity studies, and critical development studies.

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